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Couple Leaves "Seed" Money to Revive Classical Music in Coles Area

Mar-28-2006

A free weekend concert is planned as a memorial to two special community members and to raise money for the revival of a classical music artist series in the Coles County area.

More than 30 years ago, Eastern Illinois University and community residents regularly enjoyed concerts performed by symphony orchestras and well-recognized classical musical artists such as Van Cliburn, Jan Pierce and Isaac Stern. Now, thanks primarily to a \$75,000 endowment left by the late Raymond and Sue McKenna of Charleston, a guest artist series promises to once again bring such music to the EIU campus.

The McKennas, long-time friends and supporters of the arts, both were employed at the university and frequently attended arts presentations and exhibits there. Both greatly enjoyed the classical arts, in particular, and were greatly disappointed when classical music performances began to dwindle, being replaced with other forms of entertainment on campus, instead.

As advocates for bringing professional performing artists to the campus and community, the McKennas made sure their final gift to Eastern was the creation of an endowment as an incentive to creating a classical music artist series fund for the enjoyment of both the EIU and Charleston-area communities.

They realized their contribution would essentially be "seed money" to get plans for the series growing. McKenna family members recognized it, as well. And, in light of that realization, additional funding was donated, making it possible to hold a memorial concert in honor of Raymond and Sue McKenna, while raising awareness of the financial need that still exists to bring the series to fruition.

The concert, featuring the Parker String Quartet, will take place at 4 p.m. Sunday, April 2, at the Wesley United Methodist Church, 2204 Sixth St., in Charleston. The McKenna couple's children -- Larry Sparks of California and Susan LeDuc of Indiana - and their families are expected to be in attendance.

"In addition to showcasing one of the top young ensembles in existence today, this event is also being used as an opportunity to solicit donations to the endowment, which needs additional contributions in order to adequately fund an artist series of the caliber the McKennas intended," said W. Parker Melvin, chairman of Eastern's music department. "The McKennas took this wonderful and generous initial step. Now we need others of like minds to complete the project."

Contributions can be made at the concert, or checks, made payable to the EIU Foundation and earmarked "Classical Music Artist Series," may be sent to EIU Foundation, 860 W. Lincoln Ave., Charleston, Ill. 61920. For information, contact Nancy Page at (217) 581-3314.

The Parker String Quartet was founded in May of 2002 by four gifted students at Boston's New England Conservatory. The school immediately recognized the potential of the group, designating the quartet as its honors ensemble in both 2002 and 2003, and utilizing the group as the conservatory's ambassador in outreach concerts in the Boston area.

Juries on two continents awarded the young ensemble top honors at both the Concert Artists Guild International and Bordeaux String Quartet Competitions in 2005. And current engagements include concerts for the Phillips Collection and Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C.; the Ravinia Festival's Rising Stars Series in Chicago; and Patrons for Young Artists and the Schneider Concerts Chamber Music Series in New York.

Members of the Parker String Quartet have completed their bachelor's degrees, and are pursuing graduate degrees at NEC.

The quartet's visit to Charleston also will allow the musicians an opportunity to present a master class for string students at EIU and the surrounding area.



The Parker String Quartet